



NEWS RELEASE

OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OHIO PILOT PLEADS GUILTY, AGREES TO FORFEIT AIRPLANE

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. – Todd P. Graves, United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, announced that the pilot of a Piper Cherokee airplane that was carrying a suitcase full of marijuana when it landed at Fulton, Mo., Regional Airport last March pleaded guilty in federal court today to being in possession with intent to distribute more than 20 kilograms of marijuana.

Russell R. Johnston, 54, of Columbus, Ohio, pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Nanette K. Laughrey this morning to charges contained in an indictment returned by a federal grand jury in Jefferson City on April 9, 2004.

By pleading guilty, **Johnston** admitted that he was in possession of approximately 52 pounds of marijuana that he intended to distribute, which law enforcement officers found in his Piper Cherokee airplane. **Johnston** also agreed to forfeit the 1967 Piper Cherokee 180 airplane to the federal government.

An air traffic controller in Springfield, Mo., became suspicious of the Piper Cherokee airplane being monitored on radar on March 7, 2004, Graves said. **Johnston**, the pilot, did not respond to the controller's requests and was flying in an unusual manner over central Missouri. The plane landed at Fulton Regional Airport at approximately 9:05 a.m. that morning.

When officers with the Fulton, Mo., Police Department were called to the airport, **Johnston** left the area. Law enforcement officers used a canine trained in the detection of illegal narcotics to conduct an exploratory sniff on the outside of the plane. The canine alerted to the presence of an illegal drug coming from the fuselage, Graves said, so officers searched the plane. Approximately 52 pounds of marijuana was discovered inside a suitcase that was lying in the rear of the plane, directly behind the pilot.

On March 8, 2004, law enforcement officers located **Johnston** hiding behind a culvert near downtown Fulton and arrested him.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Anthony P. Gonzalez. It was investigated by the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Fulton, Mo., Police Department.

This news release, as well as additional information about the office of the United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, is available on-line at
www.usdoj.gov/usao/mow